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THE STEVENS COMMISSION.

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HISTORY OF THE INQUIRY THAT LED TO THE  
APPOINTMENT OF THE COMMISSION.

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In the early part of February, 1887, Dr. C. L. Dana, then president of the New York Neurological Society, sent to Dr. Stevens the following letter:

50 West 46th Street, N. Y.,  
February 6th, 1887.

Dear Doctor:

I wish very much that you would consent to read a paper at the next meeting of the Neurological Society, March 1st, on the relation of ocular disturbances to nervous disease, or some such title.

We should like very much to have you embody the substance of your Belgian Prize Essay.

Can you not do it? I can assure you of an interested audience. I spoke to Dr. Ranney about the matter; but he thinks you ought to speak first.

I have been trying to call upon you personally and discuss the matter, but I trust this note may be sufficient.

There is a bare possibility of the March meeting being engaged, but in that case you could have the meeting in April.

I express the unanimous feeling of our Council in hoping you will accept.

Very truly yours,

C. L. DANA,

Pres. N. Y. Neurological Society.

Dr. Stevens wrote to Dr. Dana accepting this invitation, and his acceptance was thus acknowledged :

50 West 46th Street,  
February 13th, 1887.

My Dear Doctor :

I am very glad to find you will be able to read the paper. Will you kindly send me the exact title soon.

Very sincerely,  
C. L. DANA.

Send me also the names of such gentlemen as you would like to have discuss it.

The title of Dr. Stevens's paper which was read to the Society March 1st, 1887, was :

*"Irritations arising from the visual apparatus considered as elements in the Genesis of Neuroses."*

The central thought contained in this paper was embodied in a proposition already included in a memoir which had been submitted to the Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium, which memoir has been published by that distinguished body. The proposition was as follows :

*"Difficulties attending the functions of accommodating and adjusting the eyes in the act of vision, or irritations arising from the nerves involved in these processes, are among the most prolific sources of nervous disturbances, and more frequently than other conditions, constitute a neuropathic tendency."*

The doctrine thus announced was advocated in a clear and impressive argument, and the hypothesis was verified by cases illustrative of the results of practice. There was in the paper no claim that ocular defects are the sole cause of neuroses, but the view that such defects constitute an important element in the pathogeny of functional nervous troubles was strongly presented.

In the course of the discussion which followed one member of the Society moved that a Committee of the Society be appointed to examine all the cases which had been presented as illustrative examples, with the view of ascertain-

ing the truth of the statements. The motion was not carried, but at a later time the same member renewed the subject.

Dr. Stevens suggested that any inquiry for the purpose of determining the value of his proposition should start with cases studied before as well as during and after treatment. He asserts that he did not express at that time a willingness to enter upon such an inquiry, but he soon after that received the following letter:

50 West 46th St., New York City.  
March 16th, 1887.

*Dear Doctor :*

Dr. Seguin said that you would be willing to have a committee of the Neurological Society examine cases submitted to your treatment. Accordingly, at a meeting of the Judicial Council held at my house March 16th, a committee of five was appointed to confer with you. The gentlemen on the committee are Drs. Seguin, Birdsall, Starr, W. O. Moore and David Webster.

All of these gentlemen are anxious to learn the truth regarding the efficacy of your methods, and I think that a report valuable to science and creditable to yourself will result.

Will you kindly inform me if you will co-operate?

Very truly yours,

C. L. DANA.

From this letter the following correspondence resulted.  
C. L. DANA, M.D.,

*My Dear Doctor :—*Your favor dated March 16th was received to-day, and I hasten to reply that I shall be glad to co-operate with the Neurological Society in an inquiry in regard to the value of the doctrine advocated in my paper, read to the Neurological Society, March 1st, to be conducted in such manner as to be consistent with justice to all immediately concerned in the inquiry, and satisfactory to the medical profession.

To make such an inquiry of true value, certain conditions should be observed, and those which suggest themselves to me I will state here. They are substantially those suggested to Dr. Seguin in our conversation at the close of the meeting, March 1st, but rather more in detail.

1st. To make such an inquiry of substantial value, the results of treatment in a number of cases of important neurosis should be observed from the beginning; the precise character of the neurosis should be fully established and the difficulties which may have already attended well directed treatment should be fully understood.

2d. The Commission should examine and select such a number of cases as may be determined upon (perhaps not less than twelve nor more than twenty) which should be typical cases of some of the most important functional nervous diseases and which should have during many years resisted approved methods of treatment (unless the Commission should in special cases decide that a less time would represent a reasonable duration of the complaint for such an inquiry). The inquiry should extend to such classes of diseases as epilepsy, insanity, chronic chorea, or other representative neuroses, not complicated with known organic disease or conditions which would modify the prognosis or treatment.

3d. The cases selected should be decent in manner and dress, and should be sufficiently tractable, and should possess sufficient intelligence to enable one in charge to form correct judgment concerning the ocular conditions.

4th. The treatment of the cases should be conducted by methods directed to the relief of ocular defects and difficulties; all medicines and other forms of treatment to be withdrawn, except that such medical treatment as might be demanded for intercurrent temporary conditions should be afforded upon conditions to be prescribed by the Commission. If no important ocular defects should be found, the fact should be reported to the Commission, when the case would be considered as concluded. The times and place of treating the cases should be so arranged as to occasion least inconvenience to one upon whose time and strength the demands are already excessive.

5th. The Commission should, before accepting any case as one to be included in the inquiry, carefully examine it and have a complete record made of the past history and of the existing physical or mental condition, not only in respect to the most important affection, but in respect to collateral states which any of those engaged in the inquiry should deem of importance. The record should also include a history of preceding treatment so far as it may be known, a copy of the record to be kept by the Commission and one by myself.

6th. Photographs of every patient should be obtained in every case in advance and at such subsequent time as

may be agreed upon, such photographs to be taken under circumstances which would fairly represent the physiognomy of the persons at the time of taking; the negatives should not be "retouched."

7th. At a time to be agreed upon in advance, the Commission should report to the Neurological Society the condition of the several patients with a statement of the comparative physical or mental state of each in all respects, with that at the beginning of treatment. They should make a general statement of results up to that time. A second report of similar character should be made some (perhaps six) months later. Such reports should be for publication, and copies in advance of submission to the Society should be furnished to me. Their report should also be made to the Commission of the methods and detail of treatment of each case, together with its progress and the conditions remaining at the time of making the report.

8th. Should any patient decline or neglect treatment or withdraw without the consent either of a majority of the Commission or of myself, such case should not be regarded as included in the inquiry.

9th. The Commission for such an inquiry should consist of gentlemen not only well known to the medical profession, but who have not publicly assumed an attitude so adverse to my views or to myself personally, that their judgment might be influenced by such a circumstance. At least two members of such Commission should be suggested by myself.

Believing that an inquiry conducted upon principles strictly just and thoroughly scientific would be of interest and of value to the profession, which we would all gladly serve, I shall be glad to co-operate with the Neurological Society upon conditions such as are outlined above.

Very respectfully yours,                      GEO. T. STEVENS.

33 West 33d St., New York,  
March 18, 1887.

50 West 46th St., New York, March 21.

MY DEAR DOCTOR:

Your conditions are perfectly just and fair in my opinion, except that it is impossible that you should have any share in naming the members. If, however, any of them are in your opinion too openly biassed against you, please let me know, and I will try to make some change.

Unless I hear from you, however, the Committee remains Drs. Seguin, Birdsall, Webster, Moore and Starr.<sup>1</sup> I can assure you that all are anxious to be entirely just to you.

Very sincerely,

C. L. DANA.

33 West 33d St., New York.

C. L. DANA, M. D.,

*My dear Doctor*.:—It is but just to say that two of those named for your Committee have, by published statements, done me much injustice. I am, however, greatly desirous of promoting the inquiry, and I freely withhold my objections to them and will gladly coöperate with them. If so much is conceded by me, will not a generous profession consent that, in an inquiry which must be so important to myself at least, one or two men, positively known not to be biased adversely to the views to be subjected to inquiry, should act with such a Committee, which might perhaps be enlarged to that extent?

This inquiry has been asked for not by myself, but by the Neurological Society. In consenting to it, as I gladly do, I assume a great deal of extra care and labor in the hope that I may be performing a duty and a service to my profession. Is it necessary, under the circumstances, that there should be excluded from participation in the inquiry any person who has shown a willingness to judge kindly of the subject under consideration?

Such additional members need not of necessity be personal friends or even personal acquaintances of myself, but I believe that I should have reason to be satisfied with them in the above respect.

Very sincerely yours,

GEO. T. STEVENS.

March 23, 1887.

50 W. 46th St., March 25, 1887.

*Dear Doctor*.:—Please name the two gentlemen whom you wish added to the Committee, and I will add one or both if I can do so. They must be members of the Neurological Society, of course.

I feel sure that the inquiry cannot fail to redound to your credit and that it will be of great advantage to the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Frank P. Foster and Dr. Dana were subsequently added to the Committee.—Ed.

profession. I quite appreciate the spirit you are showing in the matter.

Very truly yours,

C. L. DANA.

The Commission being constituted, meetings between members representing it and Dr. Stevens were arranged with the view of establishing a basis for the inquiry. The plan which had been presented by Dr. Stevens did not meet the views of some of the members, and demands were made for concessions to the wishes of these. Among these demands were several to which Dr. Stevens felt that he could not concede. Among them was a proposition that no case should be sent to him until examination of the ocular conditions had been made by the Commission, when the Commission should be at liberty to send the patient or not. A considerable correspondence grew out of these propositions, of which a single letter from Dr. Stevens (reproduced here) is sufficient to show something of the nature :

33 W. 33d St., N. Y., April 4, 1887.

*Dear Dr. Starr:*—On reading your letter of to-day, I find more reason than ever for insisting upon what I have written in respect to ocular examinations preceding my own.

It did not occur to me as possible that the Commission should think of culling cases in respect to the existence or non-existence of ocular conditions before submitting them to me. My conditions are explicit in stating that if no important ocular defects are found, of course by myself, "the fact should be reported to the Commission, when the case would be considered as concluded." Such a case would most certainly be counted and against me. To allow a Commission to select in advance, on the ground of the existence or non-existence of ocular defects, would be a most unusual proceeding. I most emphatically protest against any case being accepted or rejected on the ground of the presence or absence of ocular defects; and I also renew my objection to any interference with the accommodation of the eyes or familiarizing the subjects of the inquiry with the phenomena attending ocular muscular tests.

I am, Doctor, very sincerely yours, ☉

GEO. T. STEVENS.

At length, about the first of May, a plan was finally adopted, and the work of the inquiry commenced.

Dr. Stevens claims that the understanding of the articles of the agreement was, that the number of cases agreed upon as the basis of the trial were to be sent to him within a very short time, and that a preliminary report, showing the condition of all the persons subjected to the inquiry, should be made early in November, 1887. His understanding was that this should in fact mark the formal beginning of the investigation. Dr. Stevens claims that the minimum number of cases had not been sent to him at the end of the first year, nor even at a much later time. This question is presented on one side by the Commission in its report, and on the other by Dr. Stevens in his reply.

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A copy of the Commission's Report was forwarded to Dr. Stevens with the following letter :—[ED.]

October 28th, 1889.

DR. GEO. T. STEVENS,

*Dear Sir* :—At a meeting of the Commission, held Oct. 27th, your letters of the 23d and 25th inst. were carefully considered and the statements discussed. It was unanimously concluded that the Report should be presented to the Society on November 5th, 1889. A copy of the Report as adopted by the Commission is herewith sent to you. Addenda relating to the present condition of the eyes of the cases accessible to the members of the Commission, and in preparation by the ophthalmologists, and will be read before the Society. These will be furnished to you, if you so desire, when received by the Secretary.

Yours truly, M. A. STARR.